

FA Cup final today

All roads lead to Cardiff

Football

AFP, London

Compatriots Gerard Houllier and Arsene Wenger will put their friendship to one side when Liverpool and Arsenal come face to face in Saturday's FA Cup final in Cardiff.

Liverpool coach Hollier met his opposite number Wenger on a coaching course in France 20 years ago and the two have been good friends ever since.

"I have only three or four good friends in the game and Arsene is one of them," said Houllier.

The pair, who both enjoyed moderate success as players, have brought new ideas to English football which have benefited the game at domestic and international level.

Boot-room culture has made way for a more technical approach, with players encouraged to spend more time developing their skills rather than just their muscles.

They have helped English players think more about their dietary habits and social behaviour, something which has paid dividends on the pitch for both clubs.

Wenger and Houllier have impressive credentials so it is no surprise the two have been so successful in England, despite being relatively unknown before their arrival.

Houllier, who worked as teacher in Liverpool 30 years ago, led Paris St Germain to the French title in 1986, a season after taking over as coach.

In 1992 he became France national team coach, succeeding Michel Platini, but resigned two years later after the country's failure to qualify for the 1994 World Cup finals in the USA.

Houllier then took over as coach of the French under-18s and guided them to European Championship

success in 1996.

He played an instrumental part in the 1998 French World Cup success during the summer of 1998 in his role as technical director and was nominated for a special medal



GERARD HOULLIER

to recognise his part in their triumph.

In November 1998 he took over as Liverpool coach and led the club to their first trophy in six years when they defeated First Division Birmingham in the League Cup final.

And the Frenchman is on course for a unique treble should they beat Arsenal on Saturday and then topple Spanish outfit Alaves in next Wednesday's UEFA Cup final.

One player who has benefited from Houllier's management skills is England striker Emile Heskey.

Liverpool's leading scorer believes Houllier is responsible for making him a better player.

When Heskey arrived from Leicester last March for 11 million pounds (15.4 million dollars), the accusation was that he did not score enough and was not up to the pressure.

Houllier has worked tirelessly on the big hitman to destroy those myths.

"I have improved a lot since I've been here, and that's a lot to do with the manager," said Heskey.

"He frequently takes me aside for specific one-on-one coaching on certain aspects of my game, which

me. I'm scoring more this season purely because of the confidence that has been instilled into me by the boss's faith."

But Houllier has a long way to go before he can match the level of

Latest FA Cup final betting

REUTERS, London

Latest FA Cup final betting offered by British bookmaker William Hill.

Arsenal to win
1-0 7/1, 2-0 10/1, 2-1 9/1, 3-0 28/1, 3-1 25/1, 3-2 28/1, 4-0 100/1, 4-1 80/1, 4-2 80/1, 5-0 100/1, 5-1 100/1

Liverpool to win
1-0 7/1, 2-0 10/1, 2-1 8/1, 3-0 25/1, 3-1 22/1, 3-2 28/1, 4-0 100/1, 4-1 80/1, 4-2 80/1, 5-0 100/1, 5-1 100/1

Arsenal and Liverpool to draw
0-0 15/2, 1-1 5/1, 2-2 12/1, 3-3 50-1

First goalscorer:

Thierry Henry (Arsenal) 5/1, Michael Owen (Liverpool) 6/1, Sylvain Wiltord (Arsenal) 7/1, Emile Heskey (Liverpool) 13/2, Robbie Fowler (Liverpool) 13/2, Nwankwo Kanu (Arsenal) 8/1, Jari Litmanen (Liverpool) 9/1, Dennis Bergkamp (Arsenal) 9/1, No goalscorer 15/2



ARSENE WENGER

success reached by Wenger at club level.

Wenger, who has a degree in economics, led Monaco to the semi-finals of the European Cup in 1990 and the Champions League in 1994, and this season reached the quarter-finals with Arsenal.

He landed the Japanese title with Grampus Eight in successive seasons before arriving in London in September 1996.

Wenger wrote himself into the history books by winning the Premiership and FA Cup double in his first full season in charge of the north London club and became the first foreign coach to win the English championship.

The foreign grip on English football gets ever tighter. The last English manager to win a domestic trophy was Brian Little whose Aston Villa side won the League Cup in 1996.

has helped me a lot.

"When a player is showing confidence everything works well. He shows skills, an array of passing, everything.

"And much of that new confidence has come from the boss, he keeps saying I don't realise my own strength and ability, and he's worked hard to make me believe in myself.

"He's put a lot of confidence in

French preview

Nantes ready to celebrate

AFP, Paris

Nantes will win their eighth French League title on Saturday if they can bag three home points against relegated St Etienne.

The Canaries, as the yellow-stripped Nantes are known, have had a superb season featuring a run to the semi-finals of both the League Cup and the French Cup and a run in the UEFA Cup.

After narrowly escaping relegation last season the arrival of two veterans, Stephane Ziani in midfield and Romanian Viorel Moldovan in attack, coupled with the emergence of 21-year-old Michael Landreau in goal explains the turnaround.

Nantes broke four points clear at the top with six consecutive league victories after running neck-and-neck with Lille for several weeks, a seventh straight win will see them crowned champions for the first time since 1995.

St Etienne president Alain Bompard promised that his side would go down fighting.

"There are two matches left and we'll play them both to the best of our abilities. There are people pressuring us to let Nantes win but we're professionals," insisted Bompard.

Should Nantes slip up, second spot Lyon, four points behind with six points to play for, will surely close the gap by beating relegated Strasbourg, setting up a nailbiting scenario next Saturday when Nantes travel to northern rivals Lens and Lyon travel to Brittany outfit Rennes.

FIXTURES

Saturday (18:00 GMT): Lyon v Strasbourg, Nantes v St Etienne, Auxerre v Rennes, Bordeaux v Sedan, Guingamp v Troyes, Monaco v Lens, Marseille v Bastia, Paris Saint-Germain v Lille, Toulouse v Metz

Serie A preview

Inter eyeing Europe

Football

REUTERS, Milan

AC Milan and Inter Milan clash in Friday's San Siro derby knowing only the victors can retain real hopes of a Champions League berth. Parma currently occupy the fourth qualifying spot for Europe's premier club competition and they are six points ahead of both the Milan clubs.

A draw on Friday would be a dream result for Parma. If they were to beat struggling Reggina on Saturday they would be eight clear of the Milan duo with just 12 points left to play for.

Inter go into Friday's match (1830 GMT kickoff) in better form with the added incentive that their next game is at Parma, offering them a chance to close the gap.

Striker Christian Vieri's hat-trick in the 3-0 win over Atalanta on Sunday confirmed his return to peak form and the Italy international has stressed the importance of the derby for Inter's hopes.

"The UEFA Cup is an important competition but it is the Champions League wich every player dreams of taking part in and we still have our eye on that fourth place," said the former Juventus and Lazio striker.

Milan's defeat at Perugia last weekend was their first since coach Cesare Maldini took over from Alberto Zaccaroni in March but underlines a dreadful away record.

Were it not for the 20 goals of Ukrainian Andriy Shevchenko, Milan would probably be languishing in mid-table.

Injuries to key players have hampered Milan throughout the season and they head into Friday's match with several players still on the treatment table.

As well as Massimo Ambrosini and Demetrio Albertini, who are both out for the rest of the season,

Italian international wing-back Francesco Coco is likely to miss the derby.

Inter midfielder Luigi Di Biagio faces a late fitness test but Colombian defender Ivan Cordoba and Yugoslav midfielder Vladimir Jugovic are both ruled out.

Other matches (Saturday 1300 GMT kickoff unless stated, league positions in parentheses): BARI (18) v VICENZA (13)

Defeat would see bottom club Bari relegated to *Serie B* if Lecce pick up a point or more from their game at Verona.

Vicenza have been banking on three points from this game as part of their battle for survival but they will be without midfield regular Gianluca Comotto.

BRESCIA (11) v BOLOGNA (8)
Brescia will be at full strength for a game which pitches two of *Serie A*'s most experienced strikers head to head.

Roberto Baggio has scored in each of Brescia's last six games while Bologna's Giuseppe Signori has 12 goals this season.

FIORENTINA (9) v JUVENTUS (3) (Friday 1830)

Always a grudge match, this game takes on extra bite after Juventus could only draw with Roma last week and slipped to third, six points behind the leaders.

The Florence supporters would love to see their inconsistent side further dent Juve's title hopes, although suspensions to Portuguese midfielder Rui Costa and former Juve defender Moreno Torricelli have hampered those plans.

Juve also have a trio of players under one-match bans - Mark Iuliano, Alessio Tacchinardi and Ginaluca Pessotto will all be missing and Uruguayan midfielder Fabian O'Neil is set for a rare start in midfield.

NAPOLI (15) v LAZIO (2)

Lazio benefited most from last weekend's Juve-Roma draw but will

face a Napoli side fighting for their top-flight survival.

Pavel Nedved is an injury worry for Lazio coach Dino Zoff and if the Czech fails to recover Yugoslav Dejan Stankovic is likely to deputise.

REGGINA (17) v PARMA (4)

Reggina's win at Parma earlier this season sounded the death knell on Alberto Malesani's reign at the club but Renzo Ulivieri has transformed Parma since.

If the Milan derby is a stalemate, Parma could virtually book a Champions League spot and for once Ulivieri has all four strikers fit with inform duo Savo Milosevic and Marco Di Vaio the likely starters.

AS ROMA (1) v ATALANTA (7)
Roma striker Marco Delvecchio is likely to make way for Vincenzo Montella whose last minute equaliser at Juve ensured Roma remain on course for the title.

But Japanese midfielder Hidetoshi Nakata, who inspired the comeback for a 2-2 draw, is likely to be restricted to the bench.

Atalanta have faded out of the Champions League qualification race and will be without injured midfield duo Damiano Zenoni and Domenico Morfeo.

UDINESE (12) v PERUGIA (10)
Perugia's UEFA Cup qualification hopes were boosted with last week's win over AC Milan but striker Luca Saudati is out with injury for the trip to Udine.

Udinese will be missing Brazilian midfielder Alberto through suspension and must still be wary of being drawn into a late relegation battle.

VERONA (16) v LECCE (14)

Both sides remain caught up in the end of season battle to avoid relegation and another tight game like the 0-0 draw from earlier this season can be expected.

Verona are likely to drop out-of-form Romanian striker Adrian Mutu from their attack.

Fowler's fingers crossed

AFP, London

Doubts over the future of Robbie Fowler are likely to increase this weekend should the Liverpool striker be left out of the team for Saturday's English FA Cup final against Arsenal in Cardiff.

Gerard Houllier's side, who have already won the League Cup this season, can complete a trio of successes should they topple the Gunners and defeat Spanish outfit Alaves in next Wednesday's UEFA Cup final.

"There will be a couple of players who will be absolutely gutted if they miss either final, I know I will be totally gutted if it happens to me," said Fowler.

Fowler is expected to be named as one of Liverpool's substitutes because of the magnificent form of Michael Owen.

Owen has scored six goals in a week playing alongside Emile Heskey and Houllier is unlikely to change a winning formula to accommodate Fowler, who was close to leaving Anfield earlier this year.

However, despite form bids from Chelsea and Aston Villa, Fowler decided to stay and fight for his place. However, if he continues to be left out of the starting line-up his patience may wear thin.

If it becomes clear that Fowler is not considered Houllier's first choice, the transfer bandwagon could be on the road again this summer with Leeds, Chelsea and Villa all known admirers.

Fowler believes he is a victim of Houllier's rotation policy at the club and time will tell if the Liverpool-born striker will put up with playing second-fiddle to Owen.

"It's not nice to miss games, and we are talking FA Cup finals here," said Fowler. The gaffer doesn't use the word rotation, but we know what it is.

"He rests players and professional footballers want to play in every game. It's not nice to sit on the bench or be in the stands watching your mates and itching to be out there helping.

"These important games are the situations that can change lives, if you go out there and score goals."

Hargreaves heart with England

AFP, London

Bayern Munich midfielder Owen Hargreaves is ready to ignore offers from other countries and is set to pledge his loyalty to England, it was reported here Friday.

Hargreaves, who turned in a fine display for Bayern in their 2-1 Champions League semi-final victory over Real Madrid this week, has aroused interest around the globe following his exploits.

The talented 20-year-old is qualified to play international football for three countries including Canada, where he was born; England, where his father was born; and Wales the birthplace of his mother.

He could also soon qualify to play for Germany, where he has lived for the past four years.

However Hargreaves, who has already played in friendly internationals for England Under-21s, said he wants to pursue a career with England.

"I have committed myself to England," he told newspapers here.

Hargreaves has also ruled out the possibility of playing for Germany.

"I am not German. I would never play for Germany. I was born in Canada, my mother is from Rhyi and my father is from Bolton," Hargreaves said.

Hargreaves said he now hopes to play for England in a competitive match, possibly the Under-21 game with Greece on June 5.

Hargreaves, who was filling in deep central midfield for the suspended Stefan Effenberg on Wednesday, has earned the admiration of Bayern boss Ottmar Hitzfeld and club president Franz Beckenbauer.

"He showed no nerves at all on such a big occasion," Hitzfeld told the Daily Telegraph. "He's young, dynamic, strong and also has deceptive speed."

Beckenbauer told the paper: "It is hard to believe Hargreaves can turn in a performance like that. Perhaps he never had a chance to show what he could do, but last night he did."

FIFA reassures Africa

AFP, Paris

The Accra stadium stampede which left 130 people dead will not affect plans to hold the 2010 World Cup in Africa, a FIFA spokesman said Thursday.

Markus Sieglar, a spokesman for FIFA president Joseph Blatter, said the stadium tragedy in Ghana would have no bearing on the World Cup being staged in Africa.

Bundesliga preview

Bayern shift focus

Football

AFP, Berlin

After reaching for the stars in the European Champions League, Bayern Munich return to earth on Saturday while Bayern entertain Kaiserslautern in Munich.

Both matches are potential banana skins for Schalke and Ottmar Hitzfeld's Bayern, who each have 59 points.

Relegation-threatened Stuttgart, who are 14th in the league, need all the points they can get to be sure of avoiding the drop, while sixth-placed Kaiserslautern need a



PHOTO: AFP

Bayern Munich's Stefan Effenberg (L) keeps pace with his coach Ottmar Hitzfeld during a training session in Munich on Thursday.

Bayern have had to play second fiddle to Schalke 04 on the domestic front, who lead the table on goal difference with two games remain-

ing. victory to maintain their push for a UEFA Cup spot.

According to Schalke 'keeper Oliver Reck, the team in pole position at the end of this weekend's

Confederations Cup

Brazil sans superstars

Football

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Barcelona star Rivaldo and in-form striker Romario were the most notable absentees from a 35-strong preliminary Brazil squad for the Confederations Cup announced Thursday.

Real Madrid freekick wizard Roberto Carlos and Roma fullback Cafu were also missing from a list of names announced for the tournament, which takes place from May 30 to June 10 in Japan and South Korea.

Romario's Vasco da Gama teammate Juninho was also on the missing list. The squad will be whittled down to 23 names next week, a Brazil Football Federation official said.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Dida (AC Milan/Ita), Fabio Costa (Santos/Bra), Carlos Germano (Portuguesa/por)

Defenders: Ze Maria (Perugia/Ita), Evanilson (Borussia Dortmund/Ger), Silvinho (Arsenal/Eng), Anderson (Gremio/Bra), César (Sao Caetano/Bra), Leo (Santos/Bra), Lucio (Bayern Leverkusen/Ger), Edmilson (Lyon/Fra), Cesar (Rennes/Fra), Donizete (Botafogo/Bra)

Emerson (Portuguesa/Bra)

Midfielders: Vampeta (PSG/Fra), Zé Roberto (Bayern Leverkusen/Ger), Edu (Arsenal/Eng), Fabinho, Marcao Ramon (all Fluminense/Bra), Leomar (Recife/Bra), Renato (Santos/Bra), Fabio Rothenback (Internacional/Bra), Robert (Santos/Bra), Irenio (Portuguesa/Bra), Julio Batista (Sao Paulo/Bra)

Forwards: Elber (Bayern Munich/Ger), Anderson (Lyon/Fra), Christian (PSG/Fra), Washington (Ponte Preta/Bra), Dodo (Santos/Bra), Deivid (Santos/Bra), Magno Alves (Fluminense/Bra), Donizete (Botafogo/Bra)

Ghana prepares to bury victims

Football

AFP, Accra

Ghana on Friday was preparing to bury some of the victims of Africa's worst sports tragedy as a three-day period of national mourning began in memory of at least 126 people killed in a football stampede.

Victims who had been identified by relatives were due to be buried later Friday. Medical teams have conducted post-mortems to ascertain the causes of death.

Most of those to be buried Friday are Muslim victims. According to Islamic rites, the dead should be buried within 24 hours of their demise.

The gruesome task of identifying dead bodies at morgues was continuing in Accra Friday with thousands of friends and relatives thronging three city hospitals where the injured were admitted.

Meanwhile, Ghana plunged into official mourning after Wednesday's football stampede which followed a 2-1 victory by reigning league champions Hearts of Oak.

Supporters of arch rivals Kumasi Ashanti Kotoko began to rip up seats at the Accra Sports stadium, hurling them onto the pitch, causing police to fire tear gas in the stands sparking a stampede.

The crowd panicked and many were crushed underfoot, unable to escape the trouble as the gates were locked shut in the 30,000-capacity stadium and there were giant iron grills separating the stands from the

pitch.

Ghanaian President John Kufuor late Thursday made a nationwide address on television where he promised that the guilty would be punished and appealed for calm amid the prevailing anti-police sentiment.

Police overreaction is being widely blamed for the tragedy.

A visibly stunned Kufuor said anyone convicted in connection with the disaster would face "the full rigours of the law."

He also announced a three-day mourning period during which flags will be flown at half-mast, and said all the medical expenses of the injured would be borne by the state.

The president said a probe had been launched into the incident, and asked Ghanaians to contain their anger against the police.

"I am aware of the anger so many of you feel about the conduct of some policemen at the stadium last night," he said. "I am...appealing to all of you to show restraint and calm."

The Ghanaian press Friday took a neutral stand with factual reports on the aftermath of the tragedy. Headlines ranged from "A nation in tears: the day of horror and pain," "Nation goes into mourning" and "Bloody Wednesday."

However, private radio stations were inundated with calls, slamming the police for causing the tragedy.

Independent reports said the stampede claimed at least 130 lives.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Army personnel at a morgue in a military hospital in the Ghanaian capital Accra hold back crowds of anxious relatives on May 10 the day after at least 126 people were killed in a stampede in Africa's worst soccer disaster.

Primera Liga preview

Last chance to challenge Real

Football

AFP, Madrid

Defending Spanish champions Deportivo La Coruna have one last chance to put pressure on title favourites Real Madrid when they host Alaves in Friday's advance match.

Though Deportivo are eight points adrift of Real with 15 points to play for, the Galicians will hope that Real's losing streak - they have lost their last three matches on the trot - continues.

If Deportivo beat next Wednesday's UEFA Cup finalists on Friday, Real, pushing for their first domestic title for four years, will host

Espanyol Sunday with their lead trimmed to just five points.

A scenario not lost on Madrid technical director Jorge Valdano.

"Against Espanyol we need solidarity in the group and we need to feel that the whole of Madrid is behind us if we are to finish this season with the league title in our hands," said the former Argentine international and Real Madrid coach.

Madrid lost 3-0 to Celta Vigo at the weekend before a 1-1 draw at lowly Osasuna the week before while Deportivo drew at Rayo Vallecano last week after winning at home to Espanyol the week before.

Third-placed Valencia face a tricky away tie at Malaga on Sunday and if the ten-point gap between them and Real rules the title out this

season the Champions League finalists still need points to assure qualification for next season's competition.

Fourth-placed Mallorca will hope to bounce back from a disappointing loss at Osasuna when they host resurgent Celta Vigo in sixth, recent victors over top two Real and Deportivo.

Struggling giants Barcelona in fifth can expect no favours when they host Rayo Vallecano Sunday as the Madrid minnows will dig deep for survival points.

Caretaker coach of the Catalan side Carlos Rexach goes into only his second match desperate for points too, hoping to save the furniture by gaining entry to next season's Champions League.

Elsewhere Osasuna can con-

tinue their climb away from relegation when they travel to bottom spot Numancia. Racing Santander host Oviedo, Real Zaragoza travel to Las Palmas and Athletic Bilbao host Valladolid.

FIXTURES

Friday: Deportivo La Coruna v Alaves (19h00 GMT)

Saturday: Villarreal v Real Sociedad (18h30 GMT)

Sunday: Malaga v Valencia, Athletic Bilbao v Valladolid, Real Mallorca v Celta Vigo, Numancia v Osasuna (16h00 GMT), Las Palmas v Real Zaragoza (17h00 GMT), Real Madrid v Espanyol Barcelona, FC Barcelona v Rayo Vallecano (18h00 GMT), Racing Santander v Oviedo (18h15 GMT)